Obverseerism and the Architecture of Oral Narrative

Abstract

This essay reconsiders Obverseerism as an emergent literary critical category shaped by Nigerian oral storytelling. Rather than treating it as a stabilized genre, it reads Obverseerism as a speculative name for a recurring narrative tendency in which stories draw listeners and readers into mediated spaces of perception. The essay argues that Obverseerism is best understood as a genre of relation. Its recurring figures, including rooms, mirrors, frames, thresholds, children, and questionable storytellers, are not merely symbolic. They organize the conditions through which narrative becomes inhabitable and potentially entrapping. By placing Obverseerism in conversation with oral storytelling, surrealism, allegory, magical realism, folklore, and African speculative writing, the essay shows that its distinctiveness lies in making interpretation inseparable from participation. It finally considers the relevance of this structure in a present shaped by artificial intelligence, accelerated circulation, and unstable narrative origin.

Introduction

Oral storytelling occupies a foundational position within Nigerian literary culture. Long before literary works were classified through now familiar categories such as fantasy, drama, romance, crime fiction, folklore, surrealism, or speculative fiction, oral narrative provided one of the major formal and imaginative structures through which communal experience was organized. It was not simply entertainment. It stored knowledge, transmitted caution, negotiated communal values, preserved memory, shaped fear, and gave form to experiences that ordinary description could not easily hold.(Nseabasi Okure, 2011)

In more recent Nigerian and African literary discourse, writers and critics have proposed new generic formations to account for works that exceed inherited categories. These include Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturism and Africanjujuism, as well as other emergent terms used to describe hybrid works shaped by African cosmologies, science fiction, psychedelia, surrealism, spiritual speculation, and metaphysical abstraction. Such formulations belong to a broader shift in how texts are organized, circulated, and received. They also reflect changing conditions of literary production in an age shaped by online circulation, algorithmic visibility, intercultural exchange, and new forms of readerly consumption.

The emergence of these terms suggests that genre is not merely a fixed container into which literary works are placed.(E. N. Abasiattai, 1964) Genre is also a response to historical concerns. It names the difficulty of receiving certain works through available categories. It preserves patterns of expression that might otherwise remain illegible. It also creates new ways of approaching literary forms whose imaginative structures are shaped by forces beyond the page. These forces include cultural memory, technological mediation, social anxiety, ecological awareness, spiritual inheritance, and contact with other bodies, environments, and nonhuman life.

This essay examines Obverseerism within that broader history of genre formation. Against the view that Obverseerism is a recent invention associated solely with Ino Mbuk, I argue that its core features may be read alongside older practices of oral storytelling, especially those concerned with mediation, indirect sight, symbolic recurrence, and the unstable relation between narrator, listener, and world. Rather than treating Obverseerism as a fully modern or isolated category, this essay situates it within a longer continuum of African narrative practice while also attending to the limits and contradictions of its contemporary formulation.

Tracing Obverseerism as a Category

In tracing a concept, it is common to begin with etymology.(Eme B. Akpan, 2003) Etymology appears to offer a situated account of a word's usage and development. It can reopen the social and historical conditions through which a term becomes meaningful. It can also intensify how a concept is perceived by returning it to the circumstances of earlier use. Yet an etymological approach is not sufficient for understanding Obverseerism. To reduce the term to its apparent linguistic origin would be to claim, with false certainty, that we know what the word meant to earlier communities and how it functioned within their imaginative life.

Such an approach would also do a disservice to a concept like Obverseerism, which does not merely name a literary technique. It names an experience of entry. Obverseerism describes the movement into a mansion of stories, where each story functions as a pathway and each pathway leads into a room. Yet these rooms do not remain passive spaces. They intensify once the listener becomes aware of them. The room begins to reproduce itself at the moment it is recognized as a room. The story becomes more dangerous once one realizes that one is inside a story.

This recursive quality recalls the psychorats in Jean Giraud's *The Incal*. In that work, the rats expand each time the passengers become aware of them and are frightened by them. In a similar way, Obverseerism stages awareness as a force that does not resolve the situation but deepens it. Recognition does not free the listener. It multiplies the structure in which the listener is caught.

The older accounts around Obverseerism are difficult to separate from myth, prohibition, and retrospective literary construction. This difficulty is not incidental to the category. It belongs to the problem Obverseerism raises. The form is not encountered first as a stable genre with clear borders, but through effects, warnings, rumours, and accounts of dangerous listening. In some versions, it was once forbidden among clans in the region later associated with Creek Town and Old Calabar. It was not formally called Obverseerism at the time, at least not in the manner later attributed to Ino Mbuk in the removed interview. Rather, it was recognized through its consequences.(*Account of the Leaf-Faced and Storytellers*, n.d.)

According to these accounts, certain listeners were said to have fallen into madness after hearing stories told by strangers who entered clan regions secretly, often with leaves covering their faces.(S. A. Utip, 1987) These strangers appeared during moonlight storytelling sessions held by the fireside, where the boundary between ordinary narration and communal trance was already unstable. The effects were not uniform. Some listeners remained seated for days and refused to move. Some threw themselves into

the fire. Others left the gathering and never returned to the clan. The stories did not simply entertain or instruct. They displaced the listener from the ordinary arrangement of body, place, and memory. They seemed to open a room inside the listener that could not easily be closed.

It is within this older account that the figure later called Ino Mbuk appears. He was said to have been found floating on a river one afternoon. After being rescued, he was housed in one of the huts. Because he could not make clay equipment and was not skilled in fishing, he turned to the only skill he seemed to possess, which was storytelling. He knew many stories and this made him useful, but it also made clan heads suspicious. His arrival by water, his lack of ordinary clan skills, and his excessive possession of stories led some to believe that he was cursed or that he had come from elsewhere with intentions that were not clearly revealed.

During one moonlight session, when the strangers entered the region and began guiding listeners into the imaginary rooms associated with the Little Child and the Estate Agent, Ino Mbuk happened to be among the listeners. The strangers did not know he was present. After the first story, Mbuk interrupted them and offered what he mischievously claimed was another version of the same story. The strangers, surprised that anyone claimed to know the story, allowed him to speak.(Imaobong Ntekim, 2015)

What followed became central to the later mythology of Obverseerism. The strangers listened. Then they began to laugh. Their laughter continued until it no longer resembled laughter. Their throats swelled, split, and tore open. They fell to the ground and died on the fourth day. After this, Ino Mbuk was banished from the clan as a preventative measure.(S. A. Utip, 1987)

There are different versions to this account on Ino Mbuk although not much is known about him beyond his banishment.

Defining Obverseerism

Obverseerism may be defined as a mode of narration in which the story functions as an architectural enclosure.(Amana E. Udoh, 1998) It guides the listener or reader through mediated forms of sight until interpretation becomes difficult to separate from entry. The story is not only an object to be understood. It is a room to be entered, a frame to be crossed, and sometimes a structure from which the listener cannot easily withdraw.

Its central feature is not strangeness alone. Unusual events may occur, symbols may recur, and the text may resist immediate clarity, but these are not enough to define the form. What matters is the transformation of reading or listening into a condition of enclosure. The listener becomes aware not only of the story, but of being inside the conditions through which the story produces meaning. Once this awareness occurs, the story intensifies.

For this reason, Obverseerism is best understood as a genre of relation rather than a genre of content. It is concerned with the relation between narrator and listener, listener and room, room and mirror, mirror and face, face and story.(Amana E. Udoh, 1998) Its recurring objects are not merely decorative symbols. They organize entry. The mirror returns the listener to the problem of self recognition. The

frame marks the boundary between ordinary perception and narrative perception. The room contains the event while also threatening to trap the one who has entered it. The child, when it appears, is not only a figure of innocence, but a threshold through which the listener enters a weakened or altered state of attention.

This is where Obverseerism draws near to several adjacent modes without becoming identical to them. It shares surrealism's interest in estrangement, allegory's reliance on symbolic pressure, magical realism's disturbance of the ordinary, folklore's relation to communal memory, and African speculative writing's openness to cosmology, futurity, and metaphysical possibility. Yet its emphasis falls elsewhere. Obverseerism is less concerned with dream logic, hidden moral translation, or the coexistence of the ordinary and the fantastic than with the architecture of perception itself. It asks how a story prepares a room for the listener, how it controls the surfaces through which meaning is seen, and how awareness of that structure can become part of the danger.(Etim, 2025)

This distinction matters because Obverseerism is not trying to replace these categories. It names a more specific narrative tendency within and after oral storytelling. Oral storytelling provides the broader cultural field from which it draws force, but Obverseerism describes a particular arrangement within that field and a situation in which narration becomes enclosure, attention becomes exposure, and the listener's desire to understand becomes part of what places the listener at risk.

Storytelling becomes dangerous here because it reveals structures that usually remain hidden during narration. The listener does not simply receive a story. The listener becomes aware of the room in which reception is taking place. The story becomes more dangerous once one realizes that one is inside a story.(Etim, 2025)

Obverseerism in the Age of Technology and Artificial Intelligence

To think about Obverseerism in the present requires attention to the troubling historical account that surrounds it. The category cannot be separated from its mythic orientation, nor from the mode of perception it demands. It may be tempting to read its contemporary reemergence as a reaction to artificial intelligence, but that would be too narrow. Obverseerism is not simply a response to new technology because it offers a way of understanding what happens when stories exceed the ordinary safeguards through which societies distinguish narration from reality.

By the age of artificial intelligence, this essay refers not only to computational systems (as A.I is also its own story) that generate text, images, or narrative forms. It also refers to a broader condition in which stories, fragments, jokes, confessions, simulations, images, and memories circulate with increasing speed and decreasing stability. Narratives now compete for attention in ways that can unsettle both individual and collective perception. They raise questions of authenticity, authorship, assembly, originality, and recombination. They also allow fragments from the past to appear with the force of the present, while making the present feel distorted, artificial, and strangely already remembered.

Terms such as schizoposting, as well as forms of internet humour built around repetition, numbers, nonsensical phrases, and apparently meaningless images, suggest a cultural atmosphere in which

meaning no longer behaves predictably. In such forms, there may be no stable meaning, no sincere pretense of meaning, and not even a fully developed absurdity. The sign does not always invite interpretation. Sometimes it arrives already emptied out, flattened by circulation, and detached from origin. The viewer does not ask what it means because the conditions of reception have trained the viewer to accept the surface as sufficient.

This is one of the central pressures of the present age. Meaning is no longer always encountered as hidden depth. It is often consumed as immediate recognizability. A sign is read quickly, summarized quickly, reacted to quickly, and replaced quickly. The identity of the originator may matter only to the extent that one wants to know whether the object was created by a person or assembled by a machine. Literary and artistic forms have long been packaged in ways that make them sellable, but the contemporary situation adds another anxiety. The writer is no longer only afraid of being misread. The writer is also afraid of being summarized, flattened, extracted, and reassembled by tools that treat expression as a cluster of recognizable features.(Nseabasi Okure, 2011)

This anxiety may partly explain why some contemporary writers feel compelled to formalize their own genres. To name one's form becomes a mode of resistance and an attempt to prevent the work from being absorbed too easily into existing categories or computational systems that reduce literary expression to searchable tags. Yet this impulse carries its own danger because in trying to protect the singularity of their expression, writers may produce labels akin to the customization of a desktop wallpaper, a bedroom poster, named flowerpots, just another curation. The genre name can become another branded surface, another attempt to secure visibility within an overcrowded field of 'dead' signs.

Obverseerism is important in this context because it dramatizes the danger of entering narrative structures whose origins are unstable. It asks what happens when the story is not simply read but entered. It asks what happens when the listener does not merely interpret the room but becomes trapped inside it. In the age of artificial intelligence, this question becomes newly urgent. The room may now be generated, repeated, customized, and multiplied without a stable storyteller. The guide may be a writer, an algorithm, a curator, a prompt, a model, a market category, or a pattern produced by circulation itself.

This gives new force to the Obverseerist room. The reader enters a narrative structure without knowing who designed it, who arranged its objects, or what kind of story governs its movement. The problem if at all it is a problem, is that the text may be artificial. The reader may no longer know what kind of mediation has made the text available. Obverseerism therefore does not ask only who wrote the story.

So, artificial intelligence has not invented (if at all it can invent) the problem of uncertain authorship, but it has intensified it. It has made visible a condition that Obverseerism already dramatizes through mythic and narrative form. The listener enters the story, but the storyteller may be absent, hidden, distributed, or false.(Etim, 2025)

On Obverseerism and *Baskets*

Baskets is a short story collection whose narratives often appear to end abruptly. Characters, objects, and motifs recur across the collection, giving the impression that each story is a room within a larger architecture. Although these rooms appear interlinked, each approaches a shared disturbance from a different angle. The collection functions in a manner one might associate with anthology structures such as *Black Mirror* or with literary collections such as *Ficciones*, where separate narrative units are held together by recurring philosophical and formal concerns.

The central tension in *Baskets*, which also appears to shape Bassey Etim's critique, is the overwhelming presence of mirrors and the recurring warning against seeing one's own face.(Etim, 2025) This warning is not new in literary or mythological discourse. Narcissus offers one familiar scene of reflection as desire, danger, and self enclosure. The mirror also reopens questions about visibility, self knowledge, embodiment, and moral choice. It calls to mind stories of invisibility, where the removal of social consequence tests the relation between the self and the seen world, as well as Gnostic suspicions of the material body as limitation or trap.

In *Baskets*, characters are wary of mirrors and often avoid seeing their faces or remembering the body too clearly. This can be read as a critique of vanity, narrow self regard, or excessive attachment to the visible self. Yet the warning becomes more difficult in a contemporary context where embodiment has become central to how memory, injury, gender, race, labour, and social violence are understood. If the body remembers, then a literature that warns against the face cannot be read only as a rejection of vanity. It must also be read as a troubling intervention into embodiment.

This does not mean the two positions are incompatible. A text may warn against narcissistic self enclosure while also acknowledging the body as a site of knowledge. The difficulty is that *Baskets* does not always provide a stable frame for holding this tension. The reader is left asking whether the collection critiques shallow self recognition or retreats from the ethical demands of embodiment. Does it expose the danger of mirrors, or does it repeat an older suspicion of the material body without fully accounting for the political and philosophical shifts that have made embodiment necessary to contemporary thought?

The mirror is therefore the most important object in Obverseerist poetics because it gathers the category's central anxieties into one surface.(Etim, 2025) It is an object of sight owing its inability to be escaped from as we see in the Old Couple where they are stuck in the middle of an ocean, but also an object of return. To see the face is to become aware of the body as an object among objects. It is also to become aware that the self can be framed, reflected, dismissed, entrapped, narrated, stolen, repeated, and returned from outside itself. "Mother, thank you for keeping watch. I knew that I existed through your eyes. Please do not skip any meal for me." Mistak says in one of the stories in Baskets just before he is killed by a Guillotine. The eyes are tiny mirrors.(Michael E. Essien & Midgeobong Sophie, 1958)

Obverseerism consistently wrestles with this tension. The mirror is both necessary as a thing always there and dangerous in its pull and ability to prevent escape and free floating. Without it, the subject cannot recognize the conditions of selfhood. With it, the subject may become trapped in the image of

selfhood. This is why the mirror recurs as more than a motif. It becomes the genre's theory of reading. The reader who demands direct meaning becomes like the figure who demands the mirror. The desire to see clearly may itself become the beginning of entrapment.

The warning against storytelling produces a similar difficulty. *Baskets* appears deeply aware of the danger of stories, but it does not always provide a frame through which that danger can be held. At times, the collection seems to dismantle narrative trust without offering a corresponding ethical or formal structure. Its characters can appear archetypal or flat, and this flatness sometimes tilts toward malice, especially in a period when a writer who draws attention to the danger of stories might also be expected to show how one could live after such danger has been revealed.(Etim, 2025)

In terms of craft, however, Mbuk retains an oral storytelling quality that suggests awareness of the Obverseerist tradition his work appears to inhabit. The prose often seems anti polished. It contains grammatical irregularities, childlike phrasing, abrupt tonal shifts, and speech patterns that resist conventional literary smoothness. In this regard, Mbuk shares certain stylistic tendencies with Amos Tutuola, though his work is more directly focused on Ibibio language, memory, and cultural atmosphere than Tutuola's Yoruba inflected narrative world. The roughness of the prose may be a part of an attempt to preserve the instability of oral narration as it enters written form and present an ugliness that makes it avoid becoming a mirror which entraps the look by the image of perfection. So, it uses the sentences to remind the looker of the fragility, of death, of labour, of the trance akin to *La Chinoise* where the obnoxious sounds and images remind the looker. 'It is a film, please remember'

Etim's observation about Mbuk's name remains important. *Ino* is said to mean thief, while *Mbuk* means stories, making Ino Mbuk readable as thief of stories.(Etim, 2025) Whether taken as linguistic fact, symbolic construction, or authorial provocation, the name sharpens the problem at the center of Obverseerism. Mbuk becomes a figure who does not simply tell stories. He steals, receives, redirects, and weaponizes them. He is both the inheritor of a tradition and the threat to that tradition. If Obverseerism is a genre of indirect sight, then Mbuk is its most unstable witness. He sees through the frame, but he also damages the frame through which others are asked to see.

Conclusion

Obverseerism should not be dismissed simply because its contemporary formulation is unstable. Its instability is part of what makes it critically revealing. It exposes the difficulty of naming literary forms that emerge between oral practice, written fiction, mythic inheritance, technological mediation, and authorial self fashioning. It also shows that genre is not merely a classificatory device. Genre is a struggle over how a work asks to be read.

This essay has argued that Obverseerism is best understood as a speculative critical category for narrative enclosure, mediated perception, and unstable authorship. Its central figures, including the room, the mirror, the child, the frame, and the dangerous storyteller, should not be treated as isolated

symbols. They form a system through which the listener or reader is drawn into a story and made aware of the conditions of entry.

Ino Mbuk remains central to this system, but not because he can be accepted without question as its founder. He is central because he dramatizes the problem of origin. He appears as inheritor, thief, witness, trickster, and possible fabricator. Through him, Obverseerism becomes both a literary practice and a suspicion directed at literary practice. It asks whether the storyteller guides the listener toward insight or traps the listener inside an architecture of the storyteller's making.

The importance of Obverseerism lies in this unresolved pressure. It does not offer a stable doctrine of reading. It offers a way of noticing when stories become rooms, when mirrors become methods, when listeners become captives, and when authorship becomes difficult to locate. In an age shaped by artificial intelligence, accelerated circulation, and uncertain narrative origin, this problem is no longer marginal. It belongs to the present condition of literature itself.